

Forming a Local 250th Commission

By Johanna Porr Yaun



ANTHONY DA CRUZI / UNSPLASH

Many of us remember the Bicentennial period and the excitement surrounding 1976. Big corporations got into the spirit by rebranding their products with the stars and stripes, school children were tasked with civically inspired essay contests, and a reenacting community grew up around local historic sites. Bicentennial displays were everywhere, in every local historical society, and they even found their way into town halls, schools, and courthouses. Even if you weren't in the field in 1976, you've probably seen dusty and worn Bicentennial displays in forgotten corners of museums or finally being retired from public view. The commemoration of America's 200th birthday was all-encompassing, trickling down to even the smallest village museums. But why was it so ubiquitous?

The answer is simple: organization and funding. In states in the Northeast, the commemoration was planned a decade in advance and by paid, dedicated staff. Through the program they set in motion, municipalities were able to apply for status as “a Bicentennial community” and receive rights to use unified branding and templates. Once official, these municipalities could request funds to cover the costs of exhibits, lectures, publications, school group tours, and patriotic parades.

But the upcoming 250th anniversary, the Semiquincentennial, is not structured with top-down funding guaranteed to local governments like the Bicentennial was fifty years ago. The work of producing local initiatives is less centralized administratively, and therefore will be unevenly—and perhaps poorly—funded. In addition to that, we must also contend with a decentralized public awareness. Going viral in 1976 meant getting some airtime on one of the primary television networks. This time around, professionals and amateur enthusiasts need to work together to avoid the pitfalls of over-politicized media and manage to get our information out to the public.

But before we can even begin thinking about shared calendars or media strategies, we need to figure out how to legitimize the grassroots committees that will do the heavy lifting as we decide how to frame out the upcoming decade. If you are reading this and your community hasn’t gotten started yet, it’s on you to act now!

In 2016, the U.S. Congress passed H.R. 4875, establishing the United States Semiquincentennial Act, later rebranded as America 250. This commits the federal

government to commemorating the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution with a primary focus on the Fourth of July in Philadelphia, but only until the resolution’s termination date on December 31, 2027. Individual states, including New York, have taken it upon themselves to establish their own broader timeframes of commemoration.

In order for directives and (possible) funding to flow down to the local level, it’s important that regions, counties, boroughs, towns, villages, and cities establish local Semiquincentennial commissions. The America 250 entity is not engaging in local research or program planning, but if the work is done on the local level, the information can be brought to them for inclusion in the nationwide network.

Engage Elected Officials and Tourism Departments

Without the strong federal and state organization and financial support of the past, history organizations on a local level will have to invest in the planning process. But it will be worth it! As the History Relevance Initiative (active 2012–2021) explained, bringing residents and students a greater understanding of local history enhances critical thinking skills and gives communities a sense of identity.



Commemorative events like this one, where the Daughters of the American Revolution marked the 250th anniversary of the Boston Massacre, can bring local government, interest groups, history organizations, and communities together around a unified theme.



Our local governments also benefit via the economic development that comes with catering to heritage tourists (which are the best kind of tourists). They spend more, they stay longer, and they form long-term bonds with the historic sites that they visit. Study after study demonstrates that our museums and historic sites are anchor institutions that create economic ecosystems of their own, putting money in the hands of small shop and restaurant owners nearby. It also helps government budgets in the short term through hotel and sales tax revenue, and in the long term by attracting new investors.

Collaborative regional opportunities such as the Semiquincentennial also enhance museum and historic site professional networks by fostering communication between institutions. This results in the flow of resources and research, as well as new audiences.

This commemorative period is an opportunity to share responsibility with elected officials and tourism departments. They'll be able to garner support and secure needed funding if they feel like they are engaged in the process from the beginning. Forming a commission through your local government improves communication, establishes legitimacy for your actions and future requests, and allows you to use existing PR platforms to bring likely and unlikely stakeholders together.

Strategies for Forming a Commission

There are four broad approaches to forming a Semiquincentennial commission. Although circumstances vary, as a government historian I believe that the most direct way to create a sense of community ownership and secure buy-in from government officials is to lead the effort with a formal commission. The goal here is to choose the option that best enables an atmosphere that will attract a diverse commission that brings together history professionals as well as stakeholders from outside of the history and museum professions.

Strategy 1: By Executive Branch

If you feel that your best path is to inspire your city manager, village administrator, or county executive to endorse the mission to form a Semiquincentennial Commission, then you can start by writing a letter to that office holder. The letter should state the importance of the commemoration, make an argument for how it will benefit the community, and then outline how the commission will be constituted. This message should be delivered in writing and in person, if possible, to emphasize the importance.

- In Orange County, New York, County Executive Steven M. Neuhaus is active as a United States Navy Reservist, as well as a vocal supporter of veterans' issues. For this reason, I chose to approach

him and he was enthusiastic to issue Executive Order No. 2 of 2019 to establish the Orange County Semiquincentennial Commission. Because Orange County is home to dozens of important Revolutionary War sites and museums such as West Point Military Academy and Washington's Headquarters in Newburgh, and because the period of significance for these places spans the full length of the war, we decided to retain the commission from the time of the order until the end of 2033.



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Successful commissions benefit from the involvement or support of local government.

Strategy 2: By Legislative Branch

If you feel that your community would benefit from a broader base of support in this initial phase, you can approach your elected body and request the passing of a resolution. This approach can also start with a letter to the board leader, or perhaps a member who represents a ward or district that contains an important anchor institution poised to benefit. Or you can work with their administrative staff to create a Legislative Action Request. Either way, the request should include the significance of the anniversary, the civic and educational potential, and an outline of how the commission will be constituted.

- In Saratoga County, New York, where county government is managed by a Board of Supervisors, County Historian Lauren Roberts created the Saratoga County Semiquincentennial Commission via a resolution passed by the board. She looked back at former

resolutions that had been passed for the 225th anniversary and the Bicentennial and used them as guidelines to create the new resolution. The resolution defines guidelines for who serves on the commission, ensuring that stakeholders from different groups have a seat at the table. It also defined the span of the commission becoming active at the time of passing (2021) through the end of 2033.

The two important pieces of information to include in either the executive order or resolution request are 1) the time frame of the active commission and 2) the structure and requirements for membership for the commission. A lot of the other details can be figured out in the following phases.

Span of Commission: Each community has factors that will inform the decision of how long the commission should remain active. If your community has tenuous connections to the events and people of the Revolution, it's possible that a commission effective only until 2026 will be necessary. If you are on the East Coast, it is more likely that you will choose dates of significance that terminate at the end of 2033.

Structure of Membership: The size of the commission can be based on a symbolic or practical number. This will differ greatly based on geographic region or density of participating institutions. Some might correlate the structure of the membership to the number of municipalities represented, or to the number of school districts. In Orange County, New York, these options would have yielded us too many members since we have 44 municipalities and 17 school districts. We chose instead to use the number 13 to symbolize the 13 colonies because it was manageable to organize that number of people into regular communication.

Tip #1 Consider an executive order if you have a dynamic government manager who is willing to be a strong advocate for the commission. Consider a resolution if you are eager to build a wide base of support for the commemoration. Finally, consider a nonprofit if you are confident that you have the skills and connections necessary to raise donation-based funding.

Tip #2 Choose a commemorative period based on what suits your local resources, relevancy, and level of interest. Consider whether putting all your energy into a tighter time frame will have a greater impact on the community or whether you will need to spread out the commemoration to cover the anniversaries that are important to each of your local stakeholders.

Tip #3 Draft the letter to your local government with language that will be easily adapted to the final executive order, proclamation, or resolution so that it is easier for administrative staff to fulfill your request.

Tip #4 Predetermine a plan for choosing commissioners. Think about how you will ensure that the commissioners represent a swath of regions, institutions, and skillsets. Will it be open to anyone, or will seats be designated? (i.e. County Historian, a representative of the majority/minority political party, the Parks Commissioner, the director of the local historical society, a teacher, a curator, librarian, or whatever is relevant to your specific needs.)

Tip #5 Consider who might need to be left off the commission. For instance, the director of your most significant local museum may seem like a shoo-in, but if public funding is to be funneled through your commission and they are the most likely to apply, will that become a conflict of interest?



Commission projects can include researching and fundraising for new historic markers for your community.

Strategy 3: A Nonprofit 501(c)(3) with a Board of Trustees

If you feel that there is enough community support to sustain the commemorative effort via donations and grant writing, or if you feel that a lack of governmental support leaves a vacuum that could be better filled through a public fundraising campaign, then it might be best to form a nonprofit with a board of trustees. This can be attached to a specific location of significance or represent a larger municipal boundary. Having a nonprofit also opens the possibility for collaboration as a larger region which may work well in communities that are not as saturated with Revolutionary War connections.

- In Westchester County, New York, a group of stakeholders came together under the leadership of Constance Kehoe to form a nonprofit. They have been able to raise money through private donations and grants and these efforts have been nimbler than the governmental bodies thus far. The group has held events, sponsored programming, and used grant money to create “Living



250th activities are opportunities to bring generations together (like the author and her family here) and work with local schools to create programming that meets their needs and standards.

History To-Go,” a catalog of living history professionals, their rates, and programming descriptions to make it easier for local museums, schools, and libraries to support local history professionals.

Strategy 4: A Committee or Working Group

If you are in a wide range of “other” situations, ranging from there being so much interest that it’s difficult to be non-political to the other end of the spectrum that this is seemingly not important enough to your community to be on the radar of local officials, then there might be a need to forgo commissions and nonprofits in favor of a committee or working group.

- In Dutchess County, New York, under the direction of the County Historian William P. Tatum, chairs of local level planning committees were invited to join a larger county-wide committee with representation from the Dutchess County Historical Society, the Board of Education, and Dutchess County Community College. This less formal arrangement gives stakeholders a forum for collaboration without politicizing the matter. This works well in Dutchess County’s situation because they are collaborating with other levels of organization, so fundraising can be done more advantageously on the local level and grant money can be accepted via the larger Hudson Valley 250 Working Group if/when it is available.

The goal here is to choose the option that best enables an atmosphere that will attract a diverse and active group that brings together professionals with stakeholders from outside of the history and museum professions.

Appointing Commissioners

In communities with strong museum professional networks, or in the case of New York where we have the existing Local Historians Law of 1919, it may be quite obvious as to who may want to serve on the Semiquincentennial Commission. However, it’s important to cast the net wide. By making a public announcement through media outlets asking for volunteers, you may attract new talent. Potential commissioners should be vetted to ensure that they understand the role that they are signing up for, know that it’s unpaid, and have some skills that contribute to the mission. A good way to gauge these factors is to ask for a letter of interest or resumé to be submitted to the appointing body.

A press release in local newspapers might attract good candidates, but you should also deliver the request for applicants directly to the institutions that you know will be your natural allies. You can consider teachers, museum professionals, historical society trustees, members of ancestral organizations, local business owners, genealogists, professors, graduate students, authors, media and marketing professionals, or anyone else who

has civic connections or simply has a creative disposition and is willing to serve. Bringing together as many different perspectives and supporting skills as possible will enhance the process of managing the commemoration.

Tip #1 Although the executive or board will have the power to appoint commissioners, it is beneficial to gather and review letters of interest and make recommendations to the appointing body. They will likely value your suggestions as it'll make the vetting process easier for their staff.

Tip #2 The perfect balance for assembling a commission is to co-mingle seasoned public history experts with younger professionals, college students, and members of the public with complementary skills. The goal is not only to plan events and programming, but to pass the torch generationally and culturally.

Tip #3 Create terms of service (perhaps two or three years each) to broaden the base of interest and to reduce the commemoration fatigue that comes from relying on the same volunteers for the long haul.

Phases of the Commission

Writers and Thinkers (Wisdom): Right now, it's important to have members of the commission who are able to provide substance. During this phase, it will be important to make the big decisions about purpose and identity and also map out the trajectory of the full commemorative period. In regions that are dense with related history, this group will need to be knowledgeable about the local sites and stories in order to work on guides, exhibits, brochures, and lesson plans in preparation for the anniversary years.

Promoters and Organizers (Work): Moving towards 2026, it will be important to have a team in place that can promote the work of the commission, be ambassadors of the plans, and help organize and budget for events.

Dignitaries and Public Officials (Wealth): From approximately 2026–2033 (or your specific commission termination date), it will be important to bring many unlikely allies into the fold. This is the time to engage local politicians, policymakers, and nonprofit leaders to ensure that they are stakeholders and witnesses to the success of the commission. If they see the educational, civic, and economic benefits of the commemoration, they will be more likely to support local history initiatives in the future. This is the chance to ensure that funding and resources are earmarked to continue supporting history initiatives beyond the 250th anniversary.

Funding Considerations

It's possible that federal or state money might trickle down to local commissions, so even if you don't feel that a formal commission will benefit the planning process,

your elected officials will be receptive to ensuring a potential funding conduit. If they are hesitant to the idea, just ask them to imagine having to decline public funds because the commission isn't official.

But as many of you will know from recent experiences with COVID-19, these types of promises can be subject to cancellation if sudden budget constrictions require cuts. All too often, humanities funding is targeted for these clawbacks. To avoid being tethered to budget decisions on the federal or state level, your local commission should pursue funds from the designating government. Every community will have a different approach to requesting reliable funds. This might range from asking for an annual planning budget of \$5,000 to support planning meetings and cover printing of brochures or press materials, to proposing a much larger and longer-term investment of something like \$1 million to be allocated as grants to historic structures that need substantial preservation investment.

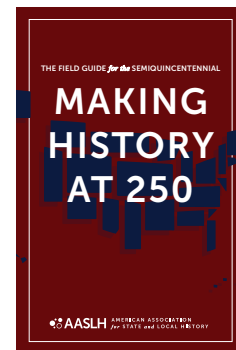
If there are no public funds available, or if you feel that supplemental funding is needed, consider partnering with an existing nonprofit to act as the accountant or chartering your own to accept donations.

Creating Themes for an Educational Strategy

Congratulations, you have a commission! The local government officials are interested. It's time to structure your commemorative plans. Do you have just one person, place, or event to center all of the activities around? Are you interested in engaging all of your local institutions in learning about broader civic topics? Or do you have lots of small historical sites and societies that all want to be involved? Again, this may be very specific to your community, so there are individual factors at play.

The best way to navigate the sheer immensity of historical content, and to endure the decade of planning and executing ahead of us, is to frame the planning process around themes. There are two approaches to choose from, or you can borrow from both:

1. Select broad civic-based themes to help guide local discussions. This seems to be the approach of entities representing larger geographic regions or institutions. This model helps to foster interest from communities that may not feel that they are connected directly to the Revolutionary War, but can be led back there through the exploration of the war's reverberating impacts. This is the approach that AASLH and the New York State Historian have taken.





Connecting with local schools, libraries, and youth organizations is vital for bringing your 250th content and programming to young learners. From K-12 classrooms to scouting organizations and Boys & Girls Clubs, the 250th commemoration can spark lifelong interests in history and civics.

2. Form themes that are pulled directly from the historical timelines. This approach anchors the programming in material culture, including primary documents, objects, structures, and archaeological remains. This model ensures that the public in general and students in particular are building a web of understanding that can be a foundation for future self-education and enrichment.

Tip #1 At the first meeting of the newly appointed commissioners, bring them together to brainstorm which themes they feel would resonate with your community.

Tip #2 Create a guide committee so that a smaller group of commissioners can focus on research and writing, while others' time can be allocated towards networking, fundraising, or planning programming in subsequent phases.

Tip #3 Connect with social studies teachers and librarians to ensure that you are incorporating themes that will be relevant to classroom material.

Tip #4 By charting your local themes with the national themes developed by AASLH for the 250th, you can put a contemporary spin on previous work.

Creating a Guide

The next step is to create a guide to help teachers, museum professionals, and the public to form their own programming around the themes. This can be as simple as a one-page handout explaining the themes and how they can be adapted to showcase local history. Or it can be an elaborate compilation of primary documents, timelines, locations of significance, or even full lesson plans.

This guide should be disseminated to each museum, historical society, social studies teacher, librarian, tourism office, and chamber of commerce by the end of 2023 to ensure that each institution has time to plan ahead and incorporate the themes into their programming.

Along with the guide, these entities should be informed that you are not asking them to drop everything they have planned to get onboard. Rather, if each institution or stakeholder is willing to create just one exhibit or program that connects to the theme each year, that will be enough to have a collective impact.

The External Work

When laid out in full, this all may seem overwhelming. But the task at hand is to create the framework that will unify the effort to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, not to put yourself into a position where you are trying to orchestrate every detail. In Orange County, New York, we have more than sixty museums and nearly twenty school districts. If each commit to hosting just one program or exhibit that is on theme, the impact will be substantial.

Since I became involved with planning for the Semiquincentennial in 2019, I have heard from many stakeholders about their fears of burnout. Among the contributors to this impending commemoration fatigue are:

- The sheer amount of history to be interpreted
- The potential length of the anniversary
- Ongoing need to maintain will and interest from elected officials



Events like reenactments can make history visible on the landscape and interest new audiences.

- Need to engage diverse stakeholders in decision-making
- Technological and educational changes since 1976
- Changing standards in history/social studies education
- Decline of school field trip opportunities
- Getting state and local government on board
- Widespread lack of funding

With all these stressors in mind, here are strategies being leveraged by local commissions, nonprofits, and committees to address them:

Tip #1 Work directly with libraries if there is no way to reach students and families in a school setting.

Tip #2 Think regionally to reflect historical events more accurately as often municipal borders have shifted from historical lines and it may be relevant that a regional landscape plays a dominant role in the story.

Tip #3 Partner with strong arts, music, business, artisan, and hospitality industries on collaborative projects to enhance each other's endeavors and goals. Be open to abstract points of entry to attract new audiences and bring a greater diversity of community voices to the endeavor.

Tip #4 Compile information to provide to outside groups so that they can help themselves without direct

involvement from the commission or committee. This might include providing a list of speakers and reenactors, reading lists for book clubs, information about museums with traveling programs, timelines of important dates, or a resource guide for researching from local collections.

History organizations today are faced with a challenge to create an important commemoration without the kind of guaranteed public and political support that was taken for granted in the past. We in the history community are tapped into silos that we'll need to activate through word-of-mouth, activism, and social media. We are tasked with this difficult mission while also needing to convey the message that this is not an obscure club for historians; everyone is welcome and encouraged to participate in this once-in-a-generation opportunity that is just around the corner.



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Learn more at aaslh.org/250.